

It was raining, the temperature touching the freezing point and strong Arctic winds heightening chilly conditions, when we arrived at Zurich, but we felt warm. It was the warmth of the reception given to us by Schweizerisches Jugendbuch-Institut (SJI). A warm welcome poured in the first "Hello!" of Mrs. Rosemarie Tschirky over the telephone when I informed her about our arrival. Dr. Jain and myself arrived early and Mrs. Jafa and Mrs. Shashi Jain joined us the same day.

A four member delegation of the AWIC had gone to Zurich to develop a link between countries in the field of children's literatures at the invitation of Schweizerisches Jugendbuch Institut. The AWIC team included Mrs. Manorama Jafa, Mrs. Shashi Jain, Dr. Dhanesh Jain and Dr. Ira Saxena. It was a three day stay from 9 April—11 April, 1990. The SJI provided boarding and lodging to the AWIC members. The three days in Zurich were tightly scheduled with meetings, discussions with persons involved in children's literature in Switzerland and visiting exhibition.

The series of interesting meetings began with a visit to the Pestalozzianum. Soft-spoken Verena Ruschmann of Schweizerisches Jugendbuch Institut (SJI) became our guide. At Pestalozzianum, we were greeted by Georges Ammau and Roberto Braun, and discussions were mostly carried on at the coffee table. This organisation was primarily working for the promotion of books for children and encouraging reading habits among children.

To attract children to the world of books, they organise exhibitions in buses and boats along the river Limmat, an occasion which generally coincides with Christmas. Another major venture of Pestalozzianum is to organise lecture-sessions of writers at different class levels in schools. Most of the expenses involved

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—IRA SAXENA

are borne by the state and partly by the community. These lecture-sessions also include special talks for the teachers, sometimes concerning various psychological aspects of motivating reading, but mostly book-talks. As many as 400 lectures are organised annually and 60,000 SF spent as honorarium for the lectures. The meeting provides a healthy interaction between writers, readers and communicators. A proper balance is maintained between the established and the upcoming writers. The writers are invited not only from Switzerland but Germany and Austria as well. When the authors meet young readers in these sessions they read passages from their books, talk about their profession, about writing books, even political topics if they are dealt in any writing.

Comics were introduced with hesitation by the Swiss publishers, but their rising popularity has encouraged more and more comics in the market, said Roberto Braun. Now they have become acceptable and are being encouraged in libraries and lecture sessions. Though we took the fact with a pinch of salt, the idea of book-talks really impressed us. So far, none of their activities concerned involvement of the artist. The Pestalozziaum had plans to enlarge their field of interests, Georges Ammann emphasised, as we took their leave with promises to remain in touch.

Our next stop was at the Public Library in Zurich (one of the 18 branches of the chain), complete with books for adults and a children's section, and computerised documentation. The librarian Mrs. Schrider was extremely friendly. She showed us around the library. A small corner with tiny coloured benches round a circular rug marked out the children's corner where Mums could squat and read out to their pre-schoolers. While the Mum did so, her toddler was free to have a field trip

among the tall book shelves. The library, though not very big in size, had a general atmosphere of informality.

Back in the hotel, we found instructions awaiting for the next day's programme. Right on the dot, Ms. Ursula Mertz was there to take us to Schweizerisches Bund Fur Jugendliterature (SBJ) at Zug. Zug is a picturesque town an hour by train away from Zurich. The SBJ work in close collaboration with the SJI. Established in 1954, the SBJ indulges in promotional ventures for children's literature. It generates funds through such activities, further channelises its resources for book promotion and encourages reading habit. For promotion of children's books the SBJ publishes posters and cards, generally carrying illustrations from picture books. A set of four cards is mailed to nearly 50 thousand consumers with an order form for purchase of more cards. Publicity handbills are inserted in popular magazines. Funds raised through sale of cards are utilized for other activities such as organising seminars, workshops or publishing research journals, especially those compiled by the SJI. "Many times," Ursula informed, "SBJ purchases books at a very heavy discount and offers them at reduced prices to individual consumers." The SBJ also sells papers and articles through special orders.

A year book is published in the German language detailing the excerpts of books, important forthcoming events like seminars and workshops activities for reading promotions, exhibition and researches. When the book-week is organised in autumn, a whole lot of publicity posters, game dice bookmarks and stickers for distribution are prepared to attract children towards books. "Stickers of course, are most popular," Ursula smiled.

Most of the SBJ's projects consist of

promoting books and bringing authors and artists into focus, all directed to the promotion of reading habit. Impressed as we were, Mrs. Jafa's mention of AWIC's activities had a desired effect, which was obvious in Ursula's expressive reactions. More so since Dr. Jain lauded the efforts of the Association members in preparation of the Illustrated Hindi Dictionary. Speaking highly of the members' dedication and perserverance to achieve perfection, he emphasised, "And, most of the work is voluntary." A shade of surprised appreciation gleaming over Ursula's face could not remain hidden.

"Who funds the SBJ's project?" I was curious. Slowly, Mrs. Ursula Mertz, Secretary of the SBJ, informed that while membership and sale of cards and posters take care of finances, the SBJ received states' support and sponsorships from publishers, banks and insurance companies. Later, Ms. Mertz treated us over a sumptuous lunch and saw us to the station as we bid farewell to the picturesque town of Zug.

On reaching Zurich we refreshed ourselves quickly and left for the SJI to attend the main conference for developing link and cooperation between the two countries. For the first time since we stepped on Zurich soil, we met Rosamarie Tschirky, so far known to us through letters and brief conversation on telephone. Almost instantly, a strong bond of friendship vibrated. And of course, to add to the warmth, piping hot coffee and cookies arrived. Ms. Anna Katharina Ulrich, a well-known critic of children's books had come from Basel to participate in the discussion at the SJI. She has been counselling the Kinderbuchfonds Dritte Welt and the Publishing House which has started a programme called BAOBAB. In this programme, they publish the works of authors and illustrators from other coun-

tries who give a most authentic impression about the culture and life-style in those countries and other specific areas. Mrs. Beatrice Meyer, in-charge of the cultural exchange programme, represented Pro Helvetica Arts Council of Switzerland, an official foundation of the Swiss Federation engaged in developing a dialogue between countries. Mrs. Heidi Hafeli represented "Kinderbuch fonds Dritte Welt" which evaluated and selected books for children written or translated into German. It is a part of Berne Declaration Group (Erklärung von Bern) which is a private organisation that aims to inform the Swiss people about other cultures and political views. Of course, Rosemarie Tschirky and Verena Ruchmann were there, representing SJI.

The meeting began with introductions in an air of certain informality and Mrs. Jafa introduced Dr. Dhanesh Jain, Shashi and me. When it came to herself she smiled rather modestly. I took the cue and introduced her. Almost instantly a relaxed informality permeated in a rather serious deliberation. Mrs. Anna Ulrich's statement drew our attention rather dramatically into the existing trends of children's books in Switzerland. She said her own interest in children's books increased as she began to wonder about the problem that "a happy country like ours, likes sad books." The interest dated back to the classic Heidi, I believe. Now in the global perspective of things, it becomes imperative to learn and appreciate social problems, life-styles of people of different cultures, more so in the child's world. Inter-cultural interaction need to begin early for growth of healthier attitudes and better international understanding. There could have been no two opinions about the matter. And then, she showed the German translation of Anita Desai's book *Village by the Sea*, included in the BAOBAB series. *Adventures of*

Phelu Da by Satyajit Ray and *Life with Grandfather* by Shankar were mentioned by her.

"But we could not appreciate that a little boy can joke around, mock and tease grandparents," said Mrs. Ulrich. "Surely we do not want our children to laugh at children of other nations," she added in a matter-of-fact manner.

"Actually, grand-parents and grand-children share a very special relationship in our country." I went on to explain how grand-children dominate the world of grand-parents, making them rejoice at their pranks, by even coming down to the level of their grand children with pleasure. As the discussion went on about culture variations, rays of understanding had already begun to penetrate the mist. We mentioned about adequate illustrations in books to give a true picture of a culture, and of course, interaction of author-translator and exchange of information from time to time. "Since we agree, fundamentally, on the worth of cultural exchange programme, how can we ensure stronger links?" I put a direct question.

"We would like to go through the titles suggested by the AWIC and evaluate selected work according to the demands of our market," replied Mrs. Ulrich. Not only did she pick-up more than a dozen titles from the array of books we had displayed, she also promised to indicate the desired themes and keep in touch with the AWIC.

When I clarified that we could not promise such a programme to be reciprocal, she reassured with a smile, that no such strings were attached. And the course of formal 'round the table discussion' soon split into person to person conversations.

The same evening, an exhibition was opened at the SJI displaying works of Beatrix Potter and illustrations of Peter Rabbit with easter eggs and cocktails. Authors and artists of children's books were invited. Our interaction with our Swiss fellow writers and illustrators continued later over pizza garnished generously with swiss moserella cheese and wine for dinner.

Following morning, programme was fixed—a meeting with two editors at their publishing houses. So, when we stepped into the SJI premises, it was time to say good-bye. Already our gifts decorated their office which Rosemarie and Verene pointed at thankfully. "You are a happy group... I am sure your Association would be a very pleasant one too," she remarked. Shashi applied sticker 'bindis' on their foreheads, a warm handshake of friendship and we came out with Verena Ruchman. Once again, our guide took us to the publishing house for our meeting, completing the hospitality which began two days back. It was still pouring and chilly, but for the AWIC delegation, there would be memories of friendship and bright prospects of a growing link in children's literature between India and Switzerland.

Language functions as the most basic and important element of human communication and culture.

— Taichi Sasaoka